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NEW ZEALAND.

THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA

LETTER TO THE PREMIER FROM THE AGENT-GENERAL IN REPLY TO COMMENTS AS TO THE ALLEGED MISLEADING NATURE OF CABLEGRAMS SENT BY HIM IN REFERENCE TO).

Laid upon the Table of the House of Representatives by Leave.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the Right Hon. the PREMIER.

Westminster Chambers, 13, Victoria Street,
London, S.W., 20th April, 1900.

SIR,—

By the two mails arriving this week I have received a considerable number of newspaper letters and articles relating to the telegrams sent to you by me between the 23rd November, 1899, and the 2nd March, 1900, about the war in South Africa.

Amongst others, I note that the Mayor of Gisborne telegraphed to you on behalf of a number of residents in that town protesting against the misleading character of my messages, and that you replied stating that, in the main, my messages had been already shown to be correct by the progress of events, and suggesting that he and other critics should suspend their judgment until they were in a position to form a final opinion. I have not been able to find the text of the Mayor of Gisborne's telegram in the newspaper files, but I assume that the points objected to by him are likely to be much the same as those taken exception to by others. If that be so, they related chiefly to my estimates of the strength of the opposing forces, and of the losses on each side.

Before dealing with these points, I would note that in certain newspapers reflections are made by writers—anonymous or other—upon my loyalty to my country. To these I decline to make any reply whatever.

Other objectors take exception to the "gloomy tone" of my messages. They appear to overlook the fact that my telegrams were addressed, not to the newspapers or to an excited and enthusiastic public, but to yourself. An official who is sending cable messages to his Government at 3s. 11d. a word is not likely to indulge in flowers of sentiment, or in spread-eagle descriptions of picturesque and interesting episodes. Nor is he called upon to consider what effect his messages will have upon enthusiastic readers imperfectly informed upon the incidents of the war. It is his business to tell his Government the driest facts in the briefest and plainest words. That is what I honestly endeavoured to do. When, at the end of last year, I became aware from the receipt of New Zealand papers that my telegrams to you were being handed to the Press for public information, I did not consider that it was my duty to modify their tone, nor do I think so now. I did foresee that some of my cables would probably grate upon the minds of readers who were being misled by inflated and inaccurate newspaper telegrams. I did foresee that the results might not possibly be exactly pleasant to myself; and I am not altogether surprised, therefore, at what has happened. Side by side with my cables were the amplified and sometimes highly coloured messages of the Press Association. In the course of transit from South Africa through London and Australia to New Zealand newspaper intelligence goes through very careful subediting, a considerable process of expansion, and some literary embellishment. Nothing of this sort, of course, was done—nor ought it to have been done—with my cables; and they may well have appeared to many to be hard, abrupt, and somewhat cold-blooded.

Especial exception seems to have been taken to my estimate of the Boer forces and losses up to the 28th February. On that day I telegraphed, "I calculate about 35,000 still in the field, with perhaps 4,000 reserve Pretoria Johannesburg. . . . Boers total losses 9,000 or 10,000, including 4,000 or 5,000 prisoners of war." In course of transmission "I calculate" became altered into "it is authenticated that"—a very different thing. First, as to the enemy's losses: On the 23rd March—that is to say, more than three weeks after my telegram went—the Boer prisoners in our hands were officially returned at 5,000 (see statement of Hon. George Wyndham in the House of Commons). A certain number of prisoners had been picked up between the 28th February and the 23rd March, so that my statement at the former date was precisely correct.

4,106 prisoners were taken in Cronje's camp, and about 400 had been captured in the preceding ten days; but of these 4,500 a certain number were non-combatants. Previous to the relief of Kimberley the Dutch prisoners in our hands numbered 430 (see official statement by the Hon. George Wyndham in the House of Commons). Of the Boer losses in killed and wounded during the first four months of the war my assailants have truly said that no authentic return exists. These are but estimates, and I never pretended to give more than my own estimate. My own estimate, as you know, was about 5,000. The following paragraph, extracted from the *Cape Times*, shows you that this estimate was considerably above what the *Cape Times* regarded on the 16th March as a confession of the true losses from the Boer hospitals:—

THE BOER LOSSES.—STARTLING FIGURES.—THE TRUTH AT LAST.—Pretoria, 16th March.—(Reuter's Special Service.)—Dr. Molengraaf, the Chief Intelligence Officer, announces that the Federal losses prior to the relief of Kimberley and Ladysmith were: Killed, 677; wounded, 2,129; accidentally killed, 24; accidentally wounded, 171; died of sickness, 99; sick who have recovered or are still under treatment, 1,251; total, 4,251. The British officers were removed to-day in cabs from the Model Schools to new quarters under Daspoort Ridge, on the outskirts of the town.

The *Cape Times* is the leading anti-Boer paper in South Africa, yet you will see that it regarded an estimate of about 3,000 killed, wounded, and dead from diseases as "the truth at last" about the 16th February, by which time the Boer losses were heavier than when I telegraphed on the 30th January, when I reckoned their loss at 5,000, including prisoners of war, then from 400 to 500. Then, a careful examination of the despatches of our generals shows how greatly newspapers overestimated the Boer losses. The battle of Elandslaagte was much the most severe defeat received by the Boers in the open field before Cronje's surrender. There the Boer losses in killed and wounded were 300 (see General White's official despatch). At Belmont they left 83 dead on the field (see Lord Methuen's despatch); from which we may infer 250 or 300 wounded. In their attack on Ladysmith, on 6th January, their losses were certainly heavier than this—I should say 500 at least; and at Spionkop they must have been over 400. At Stormberg and Colenso there is no reason to believe that they lost 200 men. At Magersfontein 300 or 400 probably represented their losses, though a company of '80 Scandinavians were almost all killed, wounded, or captured. At Modder River the Boers left 29 dead behind them, and Lord Methuen thought they had carried away others, and thrown some bodies into the river. That, however, was surmised only, and has never been confirmed. At Willow Grange, in Natal, in November, the Boers are said to have lost 30 killed, chiefly with the bayonet, though General Hildyard's despatch does not indicate any such loss; but their loss in wounded was not proportionately heavy. When Cronje surrendered about 200 of his people were found to be wounded, and it was estimated that about 50 had been killed and hastily buried. In their different encounters with General French, about Colenso and Arundel, the Boers must have lost about 300. It is upon these facts, and upon the opinions given me by qualified persons here, that I based my estimate. I should say, now, that the Boer losses in killed, wounded, and prisoners are by this time something over 11,000, and that 1,000 to 2,000 of their men are probably in hospital from sickness.

Next comes the highly debatable point of the strength of the Boer forces. On this allow me to quote the opinion of Mr. Cecil Rhodes, published in the *Daily Mail* of the 17th March last:—

Mr. Rhodes surprised me very much by saying that there have only been 30,000 Boers against us in the field. I replied that the idea at military headquarters is that there are 65,000 of them against us.

"I know," he said, "that is the English method of accounting for their reverses and avoiding blame at Home for their mistakes, but, nevertheless, there are but 30,000 Boers in this war. Look over the census reports in your 'Whitaker,' and you will see that it cannot be otherwise. Men cannot be made in a minute. It takes twenty years to make a man, and we know how many they had at the beginning of the war. The Transvaal only polled a little over 17,000 votes at the last presidential election, and even the boys voted. That State has put in 15,000 men, and the Free State not quite so many. As for the foreigners in their army, do you know the facts? You have heard the foreigners accounted for by thousands, yet the Irish 'brigade' is but 100 strong; there are only 150 Scandinavians, and, for the rest, they amount to between 1,000 and 2,000. They appear more numerous because they keep shifting their men around. The people who were besieging us used to go away and fight Methuen at Magersfontein, and at the other places before that. No, we are exaggerating their numbers, simply because by doing so we account for bad generalship without confessing it."

You will see that Mr. Rhodes's estimate is much lower than mine, yet his worst enemies—and he has many—would not accuse him of being a "pro-Boer," however ungracious his reference to the British officers may be. Nor is the chairman of Robinson's Bank put in that category, though he has lived from his boyhood in the Transvaal, has fought side by side with the Boers in their native wars, and knows them as very few well-known Englishmen know them. This gentleman, Mr. J. B. Robinson, began, if I remember correctly, by putting the strength of the Boers at 30,000, but subsequently somewhat modified his opinion on account of the number of Cape Dutch and foreign Uitlanders who had joined them. These, I gather, would, in Mr. Robinson's opinion, have swelled their numbers in the field up to about 40,000.

One of my critics, Mr. Watson, of Invercargill, asserted that the War Office put the Boer Army at 60,000 before the ultimatum, and he would add to that all the foreign and Cape Dutch auxiliaries. The Cape Dutch he numbered at from 20,000 to 30,000. I annex an extract from the verbatim report of the speech of the Under-Secretary for War to show what he really did say on the subject. It will be seen from this that the War Office put the maximum strength of the Boers at 59,000, including an ample allowance for both foreigners and Cape Dutch rebels. But that was not an estimate of what they had put in the field, but of the maximum upon which they had to draw. When I telegraphed 40,000 as their strength at the end of December I purposely added the words "confronting us." I always allowed for their keeping some thousands to guard their railways and communications, to hold down Johannesburg, to watch the natives, and to hold Pretoria and guard the prisoners there.

It may be asked why, if the Boer numbers are so small, do the British Government send a force so relatively enormous into Africa. The answer is to be found in Annex 2, in which the

war correspondent in Natal of a leading English newspaper, and one which is strongly on the side of the English Government, gives it as his opinion that, "situated as we are, one Boer is worth ten men in the attacking force." He is by no means the only expert who has said this. Military men of undoubted standing and ability have said as much to me here personally.

Indignation has been expressed at my telegram of the 23rd February, in which I give as my reasons for expecting that Cronje would surrender with his army that our forces were five to one. Did my critics imagine that nearly 5,000 mounted Boers, splendidly armed and led by a man like Cronje, would not only be defeated, but surrounded and captured in their own country by a force of anything like equal numbers? As a matter of fact, my telegram erred in one respect: I should have said something like eight to one instead of five to one. This cannot be gainsaid. I have the list of the regiments under Lord Roberts as I dictate this. When I telegraphed to you that I believed Cronje would surrender I was making a forecast which I had to justify, and I gave my reason for making it.

Now for the British losses: They were 9,660 on the last day of January; on the 23rd February they were 12,000; on the 28th February they were 15,000; by the 7th March they were estimated at over 15,600; and on the 15th March the official return showed them to be 15,900. The fighting between the 28th February and the 15th March was not very severe, except on one day near Bloemfontein. My estimate of 15,000, therefore, on the 28th February was amply borne out. Of course, I included deaths from disease, but not men sick in hospital or invalided home.

One writer seriously complains that I telegraphed on the 21st February, "There are great hopes siege of Ladysmith will soon be given up," suggesting that the words "given up" meant something derogatory to the probable success of our arms. I need not take up your time by showing that besiegers do not "give up" a siege until it has become hopeless, or their own situation untenable. What I anticipated on the 21st February was exactly what took place on the 28th February. The truth is I underestimated our losses more than once. The Suffolk Regiment, when defeated near Colesberg, lost 145 men, not 100, as I telegraphed. At Rensburg (10th to 13th February) we lost 350, not 200, as I telegraphed. The losses suffered by Lord Roberts at Paardeburg and the neighbourhood, in the fighting from the 16th to the 27th February, were—killed, 243; total casualties, 1,548. General Buller lost 5,617 men in his various attempts to relieve Ladysmith: here are the figures,—

				Killed.			Total Casualties.
Colenso ...	...	...	...	136	...	...	1,125
Potgieters	...	...	...	25	...	...	374
Spionkop	...	...	...	273	...	...	1,729
Pieters, &c.	...	...	...	311	...	...	2,389
Totals ...	...	...	...	745	...	...	5,617

As to my statement about the danger and pressure of the garrison at Ladysmith, the following paragraph, cut from the *Daily News* just after the relief, is merely one of a number which justify my view:—

It appears from the reports of our correspondent at Ladysmith that the relief of that town was even more necessary at the moment it took place than we had had reason to suppose. The garrison were without mealies, bread, biscuits, or meal. They seem to have latterly chiefly lived on horse-soup. Supplies sufficient for only four days' full rations remained, and a week would have seen them face to face with starvation. The saving of the town was therefore a very narrow thing indeed; and, whilst we may take all the more pride in the heroism which maintained the defence under such conditions, we may certainly consider ourselves fortunate that Lord Roberts's success in the Free State induced the Boers to leave before Sir Redvers such a rearguard only as he was able, by a fortnight's stiff fighting in that most difficult country, to overcome.

Another critic, who is pleased to bracket me with Dr. Leyds, accuses me of gloating over British disasters. In the week ending 16th December the British forces in South Africa undoubtedly suffered three of the most unmistakable, and, in the matter of generalship, humiliating, defeats endured by our arms during this century. In these three battles we lost nearly 3,000 men without inflicting any compensating loss on the enemy, and the feeling here over them was one of shame and grief. These three disasters were thus described in my telegrams: "11th December, 1899: Gatacre repulsed with serious loss Stormberg. Our loss about 700." "13th December, 1899: Methuen's attack repulsed with loss Monday." "16th December, 1899: Buller's attack repulsed with loss eleven guns."

Again, let any one compare the few dry, colourless words in which I described the disastrous fiasco at Spionkop with the account of this same melancholy business in the despatches of Generals Buller and Warren, and the covering despatch of Field-Marshal Lord Roberts. Lord Roberts's scathing comments on Spionkop and Stormberg have been the sensation not only of England but of Europe, and Lord Roberts is not prone to exaggerate. As to Magersfontein, you probably know what public opinion is on that.

A Napier newspaper states that the London *Daily Telegraph* had contradicted one of my statements, and observes, "Our London contemporary must have been falling foul of him in connection with his egotistic self-sufficiency." This is untrue. Neither the *Daily Telegraph* nor any other London paper has referred to the subject. From the same article I gather that this newspaper considers my inaccuracy proved because Joubert admitted that 3,000 Boers were "disabled at Spionkop." This is pure fiction, and the Boer official statement (for what it is worth) of their loss at Spionkop is the following: "Pretoria, 29th January.—Official returns give the Boer losses at the battle of Spionkop as 53 killed and 120 wounded.—REUTER." The same article in the Napier newspaper stated that Cronje had lost 8,000 men during the war, and had lost from 4,000 to 5,000 killed and wounded during the fighting just before his surrender to Lord Roberts. The truth is that there is not a military writer here who has not noticed the extraordinary small-

ness of Cronje's loss before surrendering, and quoted it as an example of the ineffectiveness of even the heaviest artillery fire upon men sheltered in trenches.

In a characteristic letter, written on the 28th February to a Dunedin newspaper, Mr. William Hutchison suggests that because I had let it be known that I had cabled twice to Major Robin without getting an answer I was making some reflection upon that gallant officer. I will not waste indignation upon this. It was necessary for me to state, not to one but to many persons here, at a certain stage that I had not succeeded in getting into communication with our contingent, for about it and its probable requirements these persons were pressing me for information. No rational person could have concluded from anything I said that I was under any other impression than that my cables had not reached Major Robin. Acting on this assumption, I telegraphed to him a third time, through General Forestier-Walker. That time my message reached, and Major Robin, instead of taking no notice of it, as Mr. Hutchison suggests, took the sensible and courteous course of sending me an immediate answer. It was desirable, in the interests of the contingents, that we should know here what they were most in want of. "Comforts" are not luxuries, and it would be a most lamentable thing if friends in London were to send our men at the front tam-o'-shanters when they wanted warm underclothing, note-paper when they were craving for tobacco, or ink when they were short of matches.

More than one newspaper writer has endeavoured to make capital out of a sentence in an article written by me to the *Speaker* newspaper in December last. This sentence was, "There are colonists, and not a few of them, who indorse the sending of contingents while expressly refraining from indorsing the war." Of course, you can prove anything by quotations, if you only take care that your quotation is incomplete enough. In the very next sentence to the one quoted I went on to say, "Others, and many of them, sincerely hold the war to be justifiable, and say so." But to fairly understand the ridiculous character of the attack on this article it will be necessary to read the whole of that portion of it relating in any way to the sending of the Australasian contingents, and this accordingly I annex. It is amusing to me to remember that the editors of the *Speaker*, though they are personal friends of mine, and wanted the article, and though it was a signed article for which they were not responsible, still hesitated to publish it on the ground of its ultra-Imperialist and warlike tone. The publication was delayed for a fortnight for this reason. I also annex the report of a speech delivered by me at the annual dinner of the Leeds Chamber of Commerce, as that and the article in the *Speaker* are virtually my only two public utterances upon the colonies and the war.

It may be too much to expect that the newspapers which have published reflections on myself will give space in their columns to so long a reply as this, but I think the attention of the New Zealand Press should be drawn to this letter, and I will ask that it be laid on the table of the House next session.

The Right Hon. the Premier, Wellington, New Zealand.

I have, &c.,

W. P. REEVES.

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